



SAINTS & HEROES



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WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
MARY BETH OWENS

SAINTS *and* HEROES

by
Ethel Pochocki



Illustrated by Mary Beth Owens

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Table of Contents

Introduction	x
Saint Juan Diego (1474–1548)	1
Saint Thomas More (1478–1535)	6
Saint Teresa of Avila (1515–1582)	16
Saint Philip Neri (1515–1595)	23
Saint Francis de Sales (1567–1622)	33
Saint Germaine (1579–1601)	40
Saint Rose of Lima (1586–1617)	45
Saint Joseph of Cupertino (1603–1663)	51
Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha (1656–1680)	59
Blessed Junipero Serra (1713–1784)	70
Saint Benedict Joseph Labré (1748–1783)	79
Venerable Pierre Toussaint (1766–1863)	84
Saint Rose Philippine Duchesne (1769–1852)	89
Venerable Anne-Therese Guerin (1798–1856)	96
Marie Fitzbach Roy (1806–1885)	102
Saint Damien of Molokai (1840–1889)	113
Saint Katharine Drexel (1858–1955)	123
Saint Josephine Bakhita (1869–1947)	134

Venerable Solanus Casey (1870–1957)	142
Blessed Pope John XXIII (1881–1963)	152
Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein) (1891–1942)	161
Saint Maximilian Kolbe (1894–1941)	167
Dorothy Day, Servant of God (1897–1980)	180
Blessed Margaret Sinclair (1900–1925)	186
Caryll Houselander (1901–1954)	194
Blessed Teresa of Calcutta (1910–1997)	205
Archbishop Oscar Romero, Servant of God (1917–1980)	214
Four Women Martyrs of El Salvador	222
Dorothy Kazel (1939–1980)	223
Jean Donovan (1953–1980)	224
Ita Ford (1940–1980)	227
Maura Clarke (1931–1980)	229
Saint Gianna Molla (1922–1962)	233
Sister Thea Bowman (1937–1990)	241
Jean Vanier (1928–)	248
The Holy Innocents of 9/11/2001	255
Saint Hildegarde the Abbess (1098–1179)	258

The saints are a rebuke and a challenge hardly to be suffered, for their way is always the impractical way of the Sermon on the Mount: poverty, humility, the following of the Cross. And yet, when the years move on and we look back, we find that it is not the social reformer or the economist or even the church leader who has done tremendous things for the human race, but the silly saints in their rags and tatters, with their empty pockets and their impossible dreams.

—Caryll Houselander

Introduction

The trouble with a book like this is that it's never finished. I'm never satisfied. I start out with a definite idea of the kind and number of saints I hope to make come alive. Favorites rise quickly, crowd together, wait in line, eager to jump onto the paper and tell their stories. I think I'll have no trouble at all, that I know exactly how it will turn out.

Then I begin my research, cover the table with books and magazines and papers, and as I work away, before I know it, I've discovered and gotten hooked on a saint I've never heard of and must know more about, a saint who is so funny, brave, outrageous or noble that I must include him or her in the book. This happens again and again. One saint leads to another and yet another. It's like eating peanuts and potato chips: You just have to have one more . . . and then another.

This book can only be a sampling of those wonderful saints and heroes who have lived and struggled as

INTRODUCTION

we do. They used God's grace and guidance so wholeheartedly that they inspire us still. If they rose above and converted their challenges, so can we! They are the road-markers for us as we meander, spurt, stumble, dance or careen down our own particular paths. They even glow in the dark, which is very helpful since that's where a lot of us are much of the time.

Since I was limited by time and space, I chose the saints and heroes I feel are especially meaningful for our lives today. They are my personal choices, and I'm sorry if some of your favorite people are not included. I haven't separated the saints from the heroes. They are mixed together here, as I'm sure they are in heaven. My feeling is that canonization is an earthly celebration for us humans. We need to see proof, like the apostle Thomas who had to stick his fingers in Jesus' wounds. God, who knows us by name and has set a seal upon us, already knows the truth and extent of our holiness.

This gathering of holy ones spans ten centuries, yet their circumstances and problems mirror ours today. They too wrestled with problems of war and ethics, commitment and service, right thinking and wise acting. They worked at how best to love God and their neighbor, even to the point of giving their lives for both.

Among this varied bunch we have soldiers and sailors, kings and queens, doctors, lawyers, beggars, thieves, poets, diplomats, fools and cranks. Some saints helped the homeless and helpless and some were homeless and helpless. Some have added to the world's

SAINTS AND HEROES

store of truth and beauty with their words and music. Some are martyrs who have given witness by their deaths. Some saints died young while others lived into their nineties.

They are men and women of all nationalities, races and personalities, all part of that wonderful, marvelous mystery we know as the Mystical Body of Christ. If PBS were to televise a special on the Mystical Body, I wonder how they would portray it. Would they show it as a living, throbbing physical body, crisscrossed with roadmap veins and arteries? Or would they show it as a community, a country, a universe alive with incredible complementary colors and one-of-a-kind souls, each offering a unique contribution to the whole?

We may not like some of the offerings; we can't like everyone. Sometimes it's hard to understand why some people become saints. As carefully as we try to put together the jigsaw of their lives, to figure out why some who were once mean, selfish or frivolous became heroically holy, generous and compassionate, there is always one piece missing. That piece is a mystery. We don't really know why bad people become good, or how the spark of God's grace catches and consumes a soul. But God knows, and eventually so will we.

The important thing to remember is that saints were human. Phyllis McGinley writes in her book *Saint Watching*, "They lost their tempers, got hungry, scolded God, were egotistical or testy or impatient in

INTRODUCTION

their turns, made mistakes and regretted them. Still they went on doggedly blundering toward heaven. . . .”

May the saints and heroes in this book help us all to keep on blundering toward heaven!



Juan Diego

IF THE STORY of Our Lady of Guadalupe were a play, Mary would be its star. She would be the center of all eyes, the one with the best dialogue, the artist skilled in turning hearts and changing minds, and the one to get the bouquets at curtain call (roses, of course).

But she wasn't a one-woman show. She needed supporting players—assorted peasants, friars and street

people, a Spanish bishop, a dying uncle, and, most importantly, the messenger. Without the messenger, Juan Diego, we would have no Guadalupe. And without the appearance of the Lady at Guadalupe, there would not have been the conversion of nine million Aztecs, who could not resist the message of Mary, who came to them as an Aztec Princess.

Juan Diego must have been exactly right for the role, because he was chosen by the star herself. But what do we know of him beyond this performance? Just a handful of facts. He was born around 1474 and lived in the village of Tolpetlac, with His wife, Maria Lucia. He was a farmer, growing mostly corn, in his Aztec community.

After the Spaniards conquered Mexico in 1521, it was a time of hardship and cruelty for the Aztecs. The Europeans considered them an inferior race, good only for use as slaves. But along with the soldiers, there came good men also, friars, who preached about their God who was a loving father to all. The natives wondered how this compassionate God could be the God of their tormentors as well. Nonetheless, Juan and Maria decided there was truth in what the friars said, and they were baptized in the new faith. They had no regrets for their old life but sometimes they did miss having a dozen gods for different purposes, instead of just One taking care of everything.

When Maria died, Juan was heartbroken, but he believed she was now in Heaven; happy, healthy and waiting for him. He tried to live his life as before, but

the house was so lonely without Maria, he moved in with his sick, elderly uncle. It cheered him up to have someone to take care of. As the years passed, Juan Diego became known as an ancianos, a wise and kind man venerated by his community.

He was fifty-seven years old when he met Mary for the first time that December morning on his way to Mass. Can you imagine how he felt as he was stopped in his tracks by the brilliant assault of birdsong? When he saw the cloud part to reveal the lovely woman dressed as an Aztec? To be addressed as “Juanito, my son, will you deliver a message to Bishop Zumarrago for me?”

Juan thought he was dreaming. Yet, the woman had called him by name. She had been there, real, he could see the color of her eyes. Now she was gone and left him with work to do, and he set off to do it.

His faith was uncluttered with doubt or worries over what people would think. Still, he did not look forward to walking into the bishop’s palace and being scorned, laughed at, sent away or thrown out. An Aztec wanting to talk to the bishop about the Virgin Mary. Imagine!

And yet, the bishop did speak with him. (A little grace, a nudge, a whisper in the ear; God has his ways.) “I’m busy now,” he told Juan. “Come back again and we’ll talk about it.”

On the second attempt, the Bishop seemed to believe him, but asked for a sign. Poor Juan must have been exhausted, but the Lady said she would have a